



American eccentricism

How the death of a dog leads to radical self-invention

The last decade in the United States has witnessed a gathering of film with an offbeat sensibility that champions the misfit, the loser, the freak or the generally maladjusted.

This genre we may call American Eccentricism, although inadequate evaluation has often led it to be tagged with unwieldy monikers like 'The New New Wave', 'Quirky New Wave' or 'Neo-Humanism'. Its master, Wes



CRITICAL CINEMA
A Angelo D'Silva

Anderson (*The Royal Tenenbaums*, *The Darjeeling Limited*), with his melancholic characters lovingly propped against gorgeous sets, is already being called an auteur. Noah Baumbach (*The Squid and the Whale*), Miranda July (*Me and You and Everyone We Know*) and Mark Mills (*Thumbsucker*) are others who have left their mark, and the recent success of Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris in *Little Miss Sunshine* owes much to the Eccentricists.

Already renowned for writing comedies like *School of Rock* and *Nacho Libre*, Mike White recently made a not-so-surprising foray into Eccentricism with his directorial debut *Year of the Dog*. Protagonist Peggy, played by the excellent Molly Shannon (*Saturday Night Live*), is a secretary in a nondescript suburban firm. Single, in her forties, her one source of happiness is her beagle named Pencil. Although on the face of it Peggy seems well-adjusted, happily delivering donuts to her workplace and being the sympathetic ear, there's an undercurrent of dissatisfaction. That veneer begins to crack when her much-loved dog tragically dies. The event puts her on a path to some radical self-invention. Befriending and consequently falling for the animal shelter guy Newt (Sarsgaard) who persuaded her to adopt another dog, she finds herself slowly awakening to a new political life of veganism and animal activism, which

eventually up-ends all normalcy in her life.

What White borrows from the Eccentricists is the brilliant juxtaposition of themes: humour in a completely demure world, irony in the (post-9/11) paranoia of America, and meaning in an agonizingly alienating society. Our misfit Peggy commands our real affection even as we are asked to laugh at her oddity. Eccentricist films have always relied on a broad ensemble of secondary characters that reinforces the humanist spirit of the films. Here, however, they serve as a foil to the saintly persona of Peggy. The script White pens plants harsh phrases into their mouths that disturb the viewers with their callous narcissism. And these moments sting, but don't always tickle. It becomes too evident that each person will eventually disappoint, only to highlight the

simple loyalty and innocence of our feathered and furred counterparts.

In this story about finding meaning and purpose, White's film fails to match the perfect balance of pain and humour accomplished by its Eccentricist cousins. Its ending, with Peggy elegiacally yet determinedly summarizing her discoveries about herself in an email over a montage of her loved ones, goes far in rescuing the film from the drudgery that infects it by that point. Sadly, despite this correction, the estranged individuals and Peggy's disaffection with humanity through most of the film sour *Year of the Dog*.

Year of the Dog
Director: Mike White
Cast: Molly Shannon, Peter Sarsgaard, Regina King, Laura Dern, Josh Pais
2007. PG-13. 97 min.

Dutch elephant

At a smashing event at the Summit Hotel recently, Cas de Stoppelaar, Consul General of Nepal to the Netherlands, and author of the recently translated *Elephant Polo*, was comfortably in his element, surrounded by friends, businessmen and Summit guests. The evening took on the flavour of a chapter from the book, where fact slips gently into fiction and then trips back again.

The evening's UN flavour was quite strong, particularly fitting given that this international organization began populating the Summit just as the tourists who used to frequent it tailed off during the years of conflict. The translator, Adriaan Verheul, was linked up by live video feed from Virginia (thanks to Skype and Worldlink). Both he and the chief guest, Ian Martin, are serving members of the United Nations.

Elephant Polo charts the trials and tribulations of Oscar Oomen, a Dutch biologist who decides to establish a hotel (the thinly disguised Summit) in Nepal. Many of the characters are drawn from de Stoppelaar's own partners and acquaintances, who will be intrigued to discover how they are rendered in the novel. The book romps along at a fair pace, with belligerent locals, indolent carpenters and imperial foreigners driving the plot. Contemporary politics intersects ever more with the revelry, and when a group of Maoists actually kidnap a number of Oscar's tourists, it appears that his carefree fun is finally over.

De Stoppelaar is an accomplished writer, with two published collections of short stories: *The Lotus Eaters* (1983) and *Beethoven in Darjeeling* (1990), both in Dutch. With *Elephant Polo*, his first novel, he has tried his hand at a new style which will prove to be popular with readers looking for culturally-rooted escapism. We leave you with a sample:

'Oscar doesn't waste a second. He runs down the staircase, almost slips and falls while making the turn under the bamboo shrubs, runs through the vegetable garden and sees through the gate of the trekking field a number of Sherpas hacking away at each other. If it wasn't for the survival of the tourist season, he would have taken a moment to absorb this scene that seems to have escaped from a medieval painting by Brueghel. Large fires light up the field and in the flickering of the flames shadows are fighting with whatever object they can lay their hands on. Everybody seems to be swinging their knuckles at everybody else. Sixty completely drunk men are in the process of eliminating each other, his entire trekking staff.'

Martin Grassi



Elephant Polo: The Rise and Fall of a Hotel in Nepal
by Cas de Stoppelaar
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